Emerging Challenges in the China-US Strategic Military Relationship

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Authors: Eric Jacobson and Phil Goldstein
Graduate Student Researchers, Center for Global Security Research, LLNL

Executive Summary:

The *Emerging Challenges in the China-US Strategic Military Relationship* workshop, held at Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory's Center for Global Security Research (CGSR) on March 28th and 29th, 2017, sought to identify and explore key factors in the evolving bilateral relationship with an emphasis on security issues. Participants broadly agreed that while the US-China relationship remains stable, particularly in the nuclear domain, the overall relationship is trending negatively. As the People's Republic of China (PRC) continues to experience economic and technological growth, its military strength is also increasing. This increase in military strength as well as Chinese actions in the region have led to increasing uneasiness amongst the United States and its allies. At the same time, it appears that China views the downturn in bilateral relations as the fault of the United States; in particular, former President Obama's rebalance policy, and the discussions of and deployment of the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) system. Concern was expressed regarding the overall stability of the US-China military relationship, and it was noted that strategic stability is less stable than before due to conventional balance shifts and the increased risks of escalation.

Beyond the overall bilateral relationship, the workshop sought to create a better understanding of China's approach to possible conflict with the United States and its allies beyond the conventional level of war. Although there was a general agreement that the probability of nuclear use was low, participants stressed China's increasing conventional, cyber, and space capabilities that threatens US allies. Discussions focused on Chinese views on limited conflicts, its non-linear approach to escalation, and concern that China may now view conflicts in a more opportunistic sense. The PRC's views on strategic deterrence seem to integrate all domains to effectively deter any opponent. These themes are closely tied into China's approach to conflict in new domains and its activities within the gray zone.

The participants also considered a better understanding of the approach by the United States and its allies to possible escalation of conflict with China how the United States and its allies could work to thwart aggressive Chinese actions in the gray zone. Again, the risks were perceived to be low, but the overall situation has worsened. In order to effectively manage crises and control escalation, it remains important for the United States to regularly coordinate with its allies in the region. Finally, the workshop sought to identify practical steps to strengthen strategic stability, deterrence, and assurance. Some questioned whether strategic stability, originally a Cold War term, is still appropriate as an organizing principle for relations with China, and if it can still serve as a guiding concept for internal US decision-making today. It has proven less useful as a concept for engaging with the Chinese. Deterrence and assurance also remain important for US relations in the Asia-Pacific, but there were some differences in opinion about how the United States should engage in both efforts.

Introduction

Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory's Center for Global Security Research (CGSR) hosted a workshop on "Emerging Challenges in the China-US Strategic Military Relationship" on March 28th and 29th, 2017, in Livermore, CA. The primary objective was to identify the current and future track of US-Chinese relations, and the important factors that will shape the overall relationship. The workshop was organized into eight panel discussions:

1) The Evolving Bilateral Relationship and the Prospects for Conflict
2) The Evolving Strategic Military Relationship: How Unstable?
3) China's Approach to Possible Conflict with the US Beyond the Gray Zone
4) China's Approach to Conflict in the New Domains
5) The US Approach to Possible Conflict with China Beyond the Gray Zone
6) Strategic Stability: Still a US Priority?
7) Implications for US and Allied Deterrence Strategies
8) Implications for US Assurance Strategies

Participants from the United States and allied nations came from diverse backgrounds in academia, government, industry, the national laboratories, and non-governmental organizations. This summary is not intended to capture every part of the not-for-attribution discussions or all the viewpoint offered during the workshop. Rather, it provides a general overview of the often complex and nuanced conversations, in hopes that this will provide a basis for future analysis and planning.

Panel 1: The Evolving Bilateral Relationship and the Prospects for Conflict

In considering the overall bilateral US-Chinese relationship the panel sought to address its past and future trends, whether relations have improved or worsened, and the effects that third parties have on the relationship. The prospects for armed conflict between China and the United States, as well as with third parties were also considered. Overall, the panel struck a pessimistic tone with a general theme of worsening relations with signals that the future trajectory of US-Chinese relations will likely see increased confrontation.

Deep pessimism was expressed regarding the future of US-Chinese relations. The prevailing view was that Chinese policymakers, once broadly positive towards the relationship with the United States, are starting to admit that relations are worsening. Although China continues to experience high levels of economic growth, it uses this growth to fuel its overall military strength while there have not been any signs of liberalization in the political domain. Driven by China's economic expansion and friendly US policies towards the international trade regime, policymakers took shelter in thinking that the US-Chinese economic relationship would act as a ballast for relations. However, this is no longer seems to be the case. Chinese actions to privilege native firms and disallow investments in information and communications technology (ICT) reduces the potential for future economic growth and decreases the level of US-Chinese economic engagement. Furthermore, due to the changing US attitudes towards the

international trade regime, the US-Chinese economic relationship is no longer reliable for guiding bilateral relations. To make matters worse, it appears that China views any downturn in the relationship to be the sole and deliberate fault of the United States. Chinese representatives have cited US policies designed to thwart China's rise such as the Obama rebalance policy, THAAD deployments, and even for encouraging some Southeast Asian states to respond unfavorably to Chinese development initiatives.[1]

Participants also considered the heightened tensions between Japan and China. Japan understands that it falls under the US nuclear umbrella and does not fear a nuclear confrontation with China. However, China's deliberate activity in the gray zone, especially around the Senkaku Islands increases Japanese worries of an emerging stability/instability paradox. Based on Chinese actions in the gray zone, Japanese policymakers are concerned with about US resolve, particularly in the context of Chinese low-level, concentrated aggression against Japanese territories.

During the past decade, Taiwan largely faded into the background as a major flashpoint for potential armed conflict. Although participants ranked the potential for military conflict as low, recent events in the United States, and the upcoming Fall 2017 Chinese Communist Party (CCP) Congress increases the potential for a political confrontation.

Participants agreed that North Korea provides the most proximate threat to regional stability and the only conflict with a realistic danger of escalating to the nuclear domain. In addressing the North Korean nuclear threat, the United States agreed to deploy THAAD in South Korea. Recent interactions with the Chinese indicate that it understands that the North Korean threat is a major impediment to regional security. However, China views THAAD deployments and especially the AN/TPY-2 radar as direct threats to its nuclear capabilities and its secure second strike capability. In fact, China's objections to THAAD are so vehement that it has resulted in a change of South Korean public opinion, which was once divided about THAAD and now is overwhelmingly in support of the deployments of the missile defense systems.

Panel 2: The Evolving Strategic Military Relationship: How Unstable?

This panel addressed the strategic military balance in the relationship between the United States, its Asian allies, and China. There was an acknowledgement amongst participants that strategic stability can be defined by both narrow and broad terms. The narrow definition only concerns actions that have impacts in the nuclear domain, while a broader definition takes into account the entirety of relations across a range of domains, including not just military but also political and economic. Unfortunately, the requirements and challenges of strategic stability will fundamentally differ depending on if one chooses to define it as a broad or narrow concept.

[1] The largest Chinese initiatives are the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and the One Belt One Road (OBOR).

By defining strategic stability in narrow terms, the strategic relationship is stable as long as each side feels confident in their nuclear second-strike capability. This capability also posits that each side is vulnerable to the nuclear arsenal of the other, creating a situation of mutual vulnerability. In that scenario, nothing can be done that would allow one side to gain an absolute security. Although panelists viewed nuclear escalation as unlikely, both US and Chinese policymakers have concerns about continued stability. On the Chinese side, panelists pointed out continued Chinese frustration with the refusal of the United States to acknowledge mutual vulnerability, continued regional missile defense deployments (of which THAAD remains a major concern), and the continued presence of US SSBNs. Altogether, Chinese policymakers point to these factors as proof that the United States is not genuine about maintaining strategic stability. On the other hand, US policymakers remain deeply concerned about Chinese military growth, especially given Chinese advances in missile technology and potential dual capable payloads, dissatisfaction with the levels of Chinese transparency, and possible shifts in Chinese nuclear doctrine.[2]

If strategic stability is broadly defined, the requirements and challenges increase over many domains (conventional, air, sea, political, economic, cyber, space). If tensions in these domains rise, strategic stability could be undermined. It is here where most Chinese policymakers define strategic stability. One major challenge is how to define the broader strategic bilateral relationship. Chinese policymakers stress that the strategic stability should fundamentally differ from the Cold War concepts of arms-race or crisis stability, arguing that those concepts privilege confrontational relations and are not suited to the modern US-Chinese relationship. It was also clear that China would not agree to any further levels of transparency. It argues that as an asymmetric relationship, the stronger United States, would have the obligation to be transparent and to assure China that it does not seek absolute security.

Japanese participants expressed concerns about China's military buildup, aggressive pursuit of gray zone actions, and military modernization programs. Based on these actions, the regional conventional force balance has shifted to overwhelmingly to favor China *vis-a-vis* Japan, resulting in the nonexistence of strategic stability at the regional level. In light of these developments, there was some discussion of the possible reintroduction of US strike capabilities, both nuclear and non-nuclear, into the region, on the argument that this would assist in restoring a regional balance.

Panel 3: China's Approach to Possible Conflict with the US Beyond the Gray Zone

There was broad agreement that China sees little risk of escalation to a major conflict with the United States or its Asian allies. In fact, some Chinese military thinkers have proclaimed the end of total warfare as a realistic possibility, shifting the focus onto limited conflicts. Because the risks of escalation to general warfare are low, China has wide latitude to operate at levels below the threshold of major armed conflict. But it still engages in actions that would better

[2] US policymakers identify two potential major changes to Chinese nuclear policy; lowering the threshold for nuclear employment (i.e. getting rid of China's no first use pledge) and the adoption of a launch-on-warning status.

position itself if war ultimately were to occur. Below the threshold of armed conflict, China engages in gray zone actions such as the physical seizure of territories and political messaging. These actions are meant in part to intimidate potential adversaries from engaging in hostile actions against Chinese forces, in an attempt to "win without fighting"—that is, to induce a shift in political alignments in the region favorable to China's interests.

Participants generally agreed that China understands the risks of escalating to the level of armed conflict and seeks to avoid war. However, some participants argued that although China does not see major risks from intentional escalation, it does worry about accidental or inadvertent escalation.[3] There was a healthy debate amongst participants about China's key concepts for controlling escalation. In order to control escalation, China relies on various tools in its deterrence toolkit. Among these tools, China believes that before the onset of conflict, mobilization for potential conflict, exercises, and drills can be combined with a robust strategic messaging campaign to deter potential adversaries from engaging in escalatory actions. Some participants did not see any Chinese concepts that allowed for escalation control, while others saw evidence of Chinese concepts that assumed a high potential for controlling escalation.

China sees deterrence as flexible and sees value in both preventing war as well as preventing limited military conflicts from escalating into broader conflicts. By understanding deterrence as a continuum (unlike the US linear approach), China sees value in intra-war deterrence in order to prevent local or low-level conflicts from escalating into a total war scenario. In this continuum, Chinese thinking identifies a period between military crisis and armed conflict (referred to as quasi-war) where both military and non-military actions occur. During this period, Chinese strategy toward intra-war deterrence relies on actions such as quickly seizing the initiative, engaging in limited kinetic strikes to destroy adversary command and control (C2) capabilities, and mimicking strikes on other assets to convince the adversary of China's ability to inflict further unacceptable damage.

These strategies are not without dangers. China sees some risk of escalation arising from its actions early in war so Chinese policymakers have been developing concepts to control and contain conflicts by inducing restraint from the United States and its allies. The tactics that China calls for using assume a high degree of escalation control, however they are also highly escalatory in nature. There is the major gamble and contradiction in Chinese deterrence strategy. If Chinese actions fail to deter the adversary from further aggression, then the risks of a crisis spinning out of control increase as highly escalatory actions might provoke the adversary to respond in kind, even if China initially meant to control escalation. Ultimately, strategies of deterrence are improved and made more credible by being able to clearly communicate one's intentions to a potential adversary. Unfortunately, Chinese concepts do not place much emphasis on dealing with miscommunication, which is problematic based on previous incidents of miscommunication with the United States.

[3] The Chinese describe the 2001 EP-3 incident as an example of how escalation could be triggered from an accidental event.

Panel 4: China's Approach to Conflict in the New Domains

This panel sought a better understanding of the space and cyber domains, and of how China's strategies and capabilities in these domains fit within the larger picture of integrated strategic deterrence. Panelists agreed that China's conception of strategic deterrence leads to escalatory problems, especially with the offensive-dominant nature of space and cyber and the lack of a shared US-Chinese understanding about how integrated strategic deterrence would work operationally.

China aims to develop a strategic deterrence framework that integrates all domains (nuclear, cyber, political, economic, space, conventional, maritime) into a toolkit that allows it to effectively deter any adversary all across the continuum of potential conflict. Participants acknowledged that building such a framework has been a goal for China since the publication of the 2000 Science of Military Strategy. While some argued that Chinese thinking in the cyber and space domains was still at the theoretical and aspirational level, the 2013 SMS and Xi Jinping's push towards reforming and reorganizing the PLA suggests that Chinese policymakers are taking the necessary steps to begin operationalizing these strategies.

Integrated strategic deterrence is a newly developed concept for both China and the United States. Unfortunately, with the addition of the cyber and space domains, policy and military leaders from both countries are unsure about the escalatory dangers from the cross-domain usage of these capabilities. Although there seems to be an understanding about not targeting nuclear command and control systems, there does not seem to be a mutual understanding of how "cross domain" deterrence will work in practice. This lack of understanding could potentially lead to unclear signaling.

Over the past ten years, China developed a view of space as the "glue" between domains. Indeed, Chinese policymakers have come to view space is central to the revolution in military affairs (RMA) and the ability to carry out joint operations that would allow integrated strategic deterrence to be operationalized. One panelist suggested that based on China's geographic position, the Chinese anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) strategy to control out to the second island chain depends heavily on its ability to leverage capabilities in space.

China has studied the US dependence on space and concluded that the loss of space assets would be a fundamental blow to US military strength. Based on China's current asymmetric position in space *vis-à-vis* the United States, it is developing both soft-kill (reversible, jamming) and hard-kill (kinetic attack) anti-satellite capabilities. Because the United States and China both see space as central to their continued military effectiveness, disarmament in space is a non-starter. Instead, one panelist argued for joint US-Chinese efforts to draw redlines around key space assets that would allow both countries to differentiate strategic and theater systems.

Based on Russian and US cyber capabilities, China views itself as in a fundamentally weak position. Beyond military capabilities, Chinese officials fears US control of the IT supply chain

and the supposed US ability to tamper with technology products that China may use in its military operations.

China views cyber capabilities as one component of the larger information domain. In this domain, conflict is highly offense-dominant with special attribution problems that makes timely response difficult[4]. The most likely effective employment of cyber capabilities calls for a three-pronged strategy referred to as "non-lethal information warfare". In this strategy, hybrid tactics, integrated network electronic warfare, and the "three warfares."[5] By employing this strategy, China hopes to secure its strategic interests without having to fight (e.g. Russian actions in Crimea).

Panel 5: The US Approach to Possible Conflict with China Beyond the Gray Zone

This panel focused on how the United States and its allies assess the risks of escalation with China, and what the panelists view as the key concepts for controlling such escalation. Although there was general agreement amongst the panelists that the risks of escalation between the United States and its allies with China remain low, there was a sense that the situation is becoming more difficult. Strategic competition between the two nations has already created some level of escalation, and luckily this competition has not generated new, direct forms of military confrontation.

The panelists did not directly state how the United States and its allies view these risks, but the US administration potentially faces a new era in multiple ways, including in how it will perceive risks of direct conflict and of conflicts involving allies. Some key themes were mentioned that illustrate these complexities.

One issue is that the United States may assess these risks differently than its allies. This argument was made evident through the US-Japan alliance. In terms of geography, Japan is much closer to China, and the Japanese see themselves as the frontline if they were ever to confront China's A2/AD capabilities. In addition, Japan is dealing with a shift in conventional power between itself and China. Japan had traditionally maintained air and sea superiority, but advances in the Chinese military are beginning to even the balance. These differences between the United States and Japan lead to potentially differing assessments of the risks of escalation, and reinforce the need for continued dialogues between the two nations.

Another factor the panelists considered is how the United States and its allies assess the gray zone, particularly in terms of the stability-instability paradox. As China's conventional

[4] Chinese military leaders studied Russian cyber employment during the 2008 war in Georgia. Russia's ability to employ these methods without facing much international pushback confirmed Chinese opinions on the difficulties of attribution and response.

[5] Three warfares – Chinese strategy to; (1) manipulate public opinion, (2) engage in psychological operations, and (3) engage in political actions that are designed to achieve aims without resorting to conventional military operations

capabilities continue to improve, there is a concern that China will become more confident in its military capabilities, and potentially more assertive in the gray zone.

While the United States has several tools at its disposal for controlling escalation, the panelists noted that the task remains a challenge. On the one hand, there are steps that the United States can take before any escalation occurs. Communication was a major theme that panelists discussed in this regard, particularly communication between the United States and Japan. While the US-Japan Defense Guidelines provides a baseline for the alliance defense policy, more discussions are necessary. There needs to be a clear understanding on both sides about each other's capabilities, and of who will take on what roles, during low end, high end, and conflicts in between. The Guidelines also make clear that Japan view the increments of escalation differently than the United States. The Japanese view the steps of escalation as seamless, including moving from the gray to the red zones.

Panel 6: Strategic Stability: Still a US Priority?

This panel focused on the concept of strategic stability, and how it should and should not be used in US-China relations. The panel debated whether strategic stability is still the right organizing concept, and recalled lessons learned from past American efforts to determine what the United States can and should do to promote strategic stability.

The panel made clear that there is no single agreed definition of strategic stability. Therefore, for any discussion of involving the strategic stability concept, it is important to identify which definition is being discussed. In the Cold War, strategic stability meant that both sides were equally confident that the opponent's nuclear first strike would not remove the credibility of the attacked state to retaliate against the attacker. In today's context, the scope of strategic stability has expanded. The concept is no longer strictly bilateral; its more multilateral character today encompasses US bilateral relations with multiple potential adversaries. Moreover, the concept can now be applied to multiple domains, rather than just the nuclear domain.

The panelists noted that the concept can still be useful in guiding US internal thinking. It can serve as a guide to policymakers when thinking about nuclear modernization, ballistic missile defense, the implications of Chinese conventional modernization, and offensive conventional operations in the space and cyber domains.

Due to the term's broad scope and multiple contexts, the US government has not arrived at a consensus on which definition to use. This lack of clarity has undermined the US effort to engage with China, which seeks clear definitions. Furthermore, the United States had a long history of maintaining strategic stability with the Soviet Union, but it is difficult to apply lessons from the Soviet relationship to the US-China context. While the panelists encouraged a reexamination of these past efforts, they also voiced a note of caution regarding mirror-imaging the term has not proven useful for negotiating directly with the Chinese.

When a version of the concept was presented to China in track 1.5 dialogues, it was evident the Chinese still interpret the strategic stability differently than the US diplomats, and in addition, the Chinese also do not find the concept useful. At worst, China believes the strategic stability is meant to constrain the PRC's efforts to ensure a credible nuclear deterrent. The dialogues have also shown the difficulty of reassuring China about national missile defense.

The panelists generally agreed that the US government needs to conduct an internal review of strategic stability. If strategic stability is deemed to still be a useful concept, policymakers can then delimit the concept's area of application. There needs to be a more structured approach to think through the stability implications of new capabilities and the risks they may entail.

Panel 7: Implications for the US and Allied Deterrence Strategies

This panel explored baseline and potential future US and allied deterrence strategies in the context of an evolving China. While the panelists generally deemed the US-China nuclear relationship to be stable, most agreed that the US and its allies should continue to strengthen deterrence, given the multiple impacts on strategic stability at the regional and global levels of China's military modernization. However, in order to do so, the United States first needs to be clear about its goals for deterrence. One panelist noted that deterrence is only effective for preventing unacceptable outcomes; not for preventing outcomes that the United States does not prefer. Although deterrence has proven less effective for preventing low level crises, the United States and its allies can optimally use deterrence to prevent higher level conflicts and escalation to those conflicts. The panelists also noted that US efforts to strengthen deterrence should focus on three areas: capability, signaling, and resolve.

The United States still retains its superior conventional capabilities over China, but the overall trend in the balance is negative. The trend partly reflects the increasing global demands on the US military. It must prepare for all scenarios, while the Chinese military only needs to tailor its investments for a narrow set of scenarios.

Unfortunately, deterrence is both difficult to build and easy to damage. This fact only highlights the importance of signaling, which the United States needs to use to demonstrate its resolve through words and actions. The panelists noted that the new administration has work to do on both fronts.

Finally, and most importantly, the United States needs to maintain its resolve. Especially with the new administration now in place, the United States must decide what it is willing to fight for, and should be clear about those "red lines" internally. Deterrence must also be established well before the fact, which makes Scarborough Shoal a key test of the US government's resolve. One of the participants argued that the United States is not clear what its stakes are in the Asia-Pacific, thus damaging US credibility. Unless US goals in the region are clearly communicated to allies and adversaries, this lack of clarity threatens to damage the perceived US resolve. This is further complicated by the fact that it is not clear whether US allies are willing to fight for

disputed islands. This raises the question of why the United States should defend its allies, if these scenarios should occur.

Will the required capabilities be available? Japan is investing in new capabilities, such as additional aircraft like the F-35, but more can be done. As for the United States, it needs to continue to enhance its missile defense, as well as link it to allies' defense networks. In addition, it needs to thoroughly prepare to defend US and allied interests in the face of China's A2/AD capabilities.

Amongst the panelists, there were some differing opinions about where the United States should focus its deterrence efforts. Some on the panel argued that the United States should concentrate on conventional deterrence. There are several vulnerable locations in the Pacific such as Japanese islands and Taiwan, which the United States should work with its allies to protect in a form of regional deterrence. Others on the panel argued that the United States cannot deter conventional actions such as those in the gray zone. The United States cannot use deterrence to prevent actions that it does not like, but must instead use deterrence to prevent the unacceptable. This doctrine would apply particularly in the nuclear domain.

Panel 8: Implications for US Assurance Strategies

This panel focused on strategies for assuring US allies and for reassuring China. Despite the challenges of both tasks, particularly reassuring China, the panel generally agreed that both tasks are vital to US interests.

Assurance remains an important function for US diplomacy and security in the Asia-Pacific region. Should the United States do more to assure its allies? There was general agreement from the panel, despite some of common criticisms, and the panel indicated that the best method for doing so is through strengthening deterrence. Allies would feel most assured when joint steps are taken to strengthen deterrence. Using the same deterrence framework of capabilities, signaling, and resolve, there are some areas that can be improved.

US allies continually monitor the signaling and resolve of the United States. The lack of a NATO in the Asia-Pacific region makes it more difficult for the United States to signal its resolve. Although the United States maintains bilateral alliances with allies in the region, the lack of a communal alliance means that allies are not represented in the same way in US decision-making as allies that are a part of NATO.

The panelists generally agreed that reassuring China remains a difficult but important task. Some believe that China cannot be reassured, but attempting to do so still yields benefits for the United States. First, US attempts at reducing the possibility of a misunderstanding will allow the Chinese to understand US intentions better, and might reduce China's suspicions and concerns. Second, it was noted that there is a difference between receiving the message and accepting the message. To enhance the latter, the United States needs to reach people in China's Party leadership who are likely to be more accepting of US messaging.

Ultimately, there is the question of whether China wants to be assured. The participants' answers were divided on this question. Some expressed believe that it is difficult to really know the answer, while others believe that China is not interested in being assured.

Conclusions

Overall, this workshop cast a grim picture of the future of US-China strategic military relations. Analysts saw profound shifts in Chinese views towards relations with the United States. Chinese policymakers, once generally positive towards US relations, are now confused about where the relationship is heading. Likewise, US policymakers are dismayed with China's recent aggressive gray zone actions in the East and South China Seas, with some calling for increased confrontation in order to thwart these aggressive activities. Japanese participants also stressed their discomfort with China's unfettered rise in conventional capabilities, leading to a classic case of the stability/instability paradox. While participants agreed that stability exists at the nuclear level, they saw little stability at the regional level (where both conventional and nuclear force asymmetries are troubling to Japan).

It was agreed that both official and unofficial bilateral dialogues have gotten little traction on the topic of strategic stability. The US aspiration to use this as an organizing concept for bilateral strategic military relations has not been matched on the Chinese side. Whether or not the new US administration stays with the principle of strategic stability as an organizing concept is an open question.

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